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Embarrassed by the Nineteenth Century

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Many readers of this consortium volume will find the title of this essay, and perhaps its body too, perplexing; as specialists in the revolutionary era, many of you have not had a chance to be embarrassed by the nineteenth century or have always found the post-Napoleonic era to be an overcrowded closet crammed with machines, bureaucrats, and corsets, whose door one shudders to open. I, on the other hand, hail from a specialist foxhole dug into the distant shores of the fin de siècle, but have felt constrained, in pursuing various projects, to delve more deeply into institutions and events before 1880. From these excavations of the nineteenth century—some of which took me back as far as the Renaissance—come the set of remarks which follow. A warning: this is not a research paper. I will be drawing on personal experience, observation, and a few recent texts to form the basis for a sort of a micro-historiography, whose aim is to illuminate changes in modern European history writing in the last twenty years or so. Those who know me well, and know that my two big projects at the moment are the history of oriental philology in Germany and the mythological kitsch of the Swiss painter Arnold Böcklin, will understand immediately why I am embarrassed by the nineteenth century; but this is intended to throw light on a much wider circle of historians and to suggest a few ways in which if we cannot escape our embarrassment, we can at least learn to use it constructively.

I do not remember precisely when I began to be embarrassed by the nineteenth century; certainly it was not in my undergraduate days. Entering Berkeley in 1980, I met plenty of scholars happily writing dissertations and books on French working class movements and Dickens's novels, discussing the cultural politics of Impressionism, and debating the finer points of Marx's *Grundrisse* in the not yet Starbucks clean cafes of Telegraph Avenue. My (exquisite) intellectual history course in 1982 started with Kant and ended with Flaubert, and even took Mill seriously; I don't recall hearing the term 'early modern Europe' bantered about, and I don't believe lecture courses were yet offered which focused exclusively on twentieth-century Europe or

America. Two senior scholars did, however, devote a semester to team-teaching a memorable course on nineteenth-century Russian intellectual history. In this world, Ranke and Macaulay still stood as the founders of professional history; 1848 remained a critical turning point, and the Industrial Revolution seemed really to have happened.

Looking back on these years, surely one might have seen the tide beginning to turn; Foucault visited Berkeley several times in the early 1980s, and the house was packed for his "The Culture of the Self" lecture in 1983—though few of us, including the *Daily Cal* reporters, understood what he said. The linguistic turn was certainly underway and beginning to push out quantitative methods. In my undergrad history-ography course, we read Thomas Kuhn and Haydn White, and even sallied forth to do battle with the opacity of Jacques Lacan. Yet, during the next few years (1985-91), in graduate school at the University of Chicago, I took courses in which we still read Taine and Spencer, Clausewitz and Quinet. I got some glimmerings of French and English revisionism; Keith Baker and Mark Kishlansky were both there, pushing in the first instance, the revolution backward, and in the latter, the formation of political ideologies forward.¹ Foucault was all the rage in the History of Human Sciences workshop, and Habermas's *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*—first translated in 1989—was beginning to trick down to grad student consciousness. Japan began to appear as a point of comparison and contrast, but I remained wholly ignorant of *Subaltern Studies*, which started publication in 1983. One had begun to hear mutterings about Derrida, Bataille, and Deleuze. But, being an intellectual historian, I was used to reading stuff I did not understand and could not use, and I could not imagine anyone taking French theory seriously, much less applying it to the past. I certainly saw no patterns emerging—and, although it was clear that the interests of my cohort and many of my teachers were drifting into the twentieth century, Europe had not yet been decentered, nor had the nineteenth century become banal.

Thus it was not until I went to Princeton in 1992 as a junior professor and began to look around that it struck me: no one was talking about working class movements any more; no one was writing about Tocqueville or Mazzini or Lord Curzon. A Gladstone scholar stayed only a short while before moving back to England. Marx was out, Mill interesting only insofar as he was entangled with India. One could certainly talk religion, or culture, but God forbid one should casually mention 'the Industrial Revolution.' Deconstructionism had not become an orthodoxy; on the contrary, everyone I met had an unkind word for Derrida. But, combined with an increasing sensitivity for non-European perspectives, literary criticism had shocked historians

into the realization that our truths were not necessarily other people's truths. In this less brave new world, microhistory was in; counting things was out. Of course, many of my colleagues were still doing path-breaking work on nineteenth-century topics (Philip Nord, Harold James, Laura Engelstein, and Gerald Geison, to name a few), but somehow, their interests, and those of their students, also seemed to be wandering forward in time, and away from conventional subjects. Naturally, too, Princeton was (and is) a unique place, traditionally strongest in early modern history. But the sense I was getting came not only from Princeton, but from the profession as a whole, from that rather ineffable sense one gets, at job interviews and guest lectures, in teaching undergraduates and talking to graduate students, in reading journal articles and book reviews, that some things are interesting, and others not. And what was definitely not interesting any more was nineteenth-century Europe.

One could see this simply in the trajectories new books seemed to sketch. In modern history, everything now seemed to follow the chronology of the Foucaultian epistemes, according to which sudden changes in penal policy, economic thought, and gender roles occurred about 1780, and set history's direction until sometime around 1960. (My own book, published in 1996, I now see, fits this model precisely.²) Doctoral students dove into the eighteenth century or plunged ahead into the unplumbed archives of the twentieth century. Something had happened to the nineteenth century—it was no longer cool to believe that it mattered. Yes, it was there, and yes, intensifications of various kinds had happened between 1800 and 1901—but the real action was elsewhere, so much so that I began to feel rather abashed to admit that yes, I did read and write about those fussy and nearly forgotten creatures of the Victorian-Wilhelmine age. Perhaps this is why I signed on to a world history textbook project, an endeavor which would revolutionize my perspective and force me to hear what others were saying about European history and to think about how to revive its interest—without presuming its centrality—for the historians of the twenty-first century.³

Since the early nineties, then, I have been sensing a general retreat from the nineteenth century, especially among American historians of Europe; this is not nearly so obvious on the continent, nor, I think in American history. There are many reasons for this retreat, some of them quite prosaic, and others perhaps more worrisome. To take the prosaic circumstances first: naturally, some of the retreat I have perceived is the result of a new generation's boredom with the questions of the previous generation: working class politics, classic social history, high diplomatic history—all that has been done, I've heard, and even said myself. This 'been there, done that' effect is natural given the new topics that have emerged in recent years, most obviously the

² Suzanne Marchand, *Down from Olympus: Archaeology and Cultural Politics in Germany, 1750-1970* (Princeton, 1996).

³ After many years of preparation, our world history has just appeared; see Robert Tignor, et al., *Worlds Together, Worlds Apart* (New York, 2002).

¹ Keith Baker's co-edited series, *The French Revolution and the Creation of Modern Political Culture* (New York, 1990), began to appear in 1987-94; Kishlansky's *Parliamentary Selection* appeared in 1986, though Kishlansky is by no means the most ardent of revisionists; see his criticisms of John Adams in, "Say What?" *The Historical Journal*, XXIII (1990), 917-37. Mark Kishlansky, *Parliamentary Selection: Political Choice in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, 1986).

study of imperialism and national identities, subjects long ignored and now deservedly coming into their own. Moreover, classic nineteenth-century topics have paled as the twentieth century has lengthened. The twentieth century is twenty years longer than it was when I entered Berkeley, not to mention over now, and many new archives have opened and beckon to eager young historians. Indeed, the post-World War II period is now a boom period for inquiry among European historians, whereas in 1980 one simply could not see it as 'history' or, really, be taken seriously as a twentieth-century scholar—and then, too, we did not have the Maastricht treaty, the fall of the Berlin Wall, or September 11 to use as convenient framing devices and endpoints.

Another wider set of circumstances has conspired to reduce the centrality of the nineteenth century, and that is the shrinking of European history with respect to other world histories. This is partly the result of the globalization of the economy and the completion of decolonization (as with the Holocaust, it seems to have taken a quarter century to digest before historians got to it). European history's decline was also partly produced by Europe's loss of global political and economic clout, relative to the United States and Asia; perhaps more important are changes in our own national demographics, as Hispanic, Asian, and Southeast Asian immigrants increase and Scots-Irish, German, and Italian 'roots' lose their social moorings. As John R. Gillis perceptively described in a 1996 essay, in light of these changes, "...it can no longer be assumed that European history will be Americans' second history."⁴ Increasingly, as Gillis notes, European positions are being cut to make way for historians of other cultures, and graduate students are moving into non-western specialties. As we can probably all testify from experience, world history is rapidly replacing western civilization as the basic introductory course for undergraduates. Europe, nineteenth century and otherwise, is simply less resonant — and less relevant — than it used to be.⁵

All of this explains a reduction in emphasis, but it does not account for the 'embarrassment' which, I have suggested, adheres not simply to European history, but especially to the nineteenth century. What makes me believe something else is afoot is the fact that the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries—not to mention the twentieth—seem to be flourishing while the nineteenth century is taking a disproportionate share of the anti-Eurocentric animus. That this has happened is rather hard to prove, but I think many in the audience will agree that, in the last few years, the discipline's seminal works have fallen on either side of the nineteenth-century divide, with most of

⁴John R. Gillis, "The Future of European History" (April 1996); <http://www.theaha.org/perspectives/issue/1996/9604>

⁵Of course, European history is still very strong, compared to other national histories (except, of course, American); if, in the last twenty years, it has become much more common (and for research universities nearly imperative) to offer courses in Asian, African, and Latin American history, Europeanists have no need to fear the total eclipse of their field. For some discussion and statistics, see Robert Townsend's "The State of the History Department: A Report on the 1999 Departmental Survey," at <http://www.theaha.org/info/inteltohistory.htm>.

them on the pre-1789 side. In recent years, the number of books about Gibbon (including JGA Pocock's recent two-volume study) has far exceeded the number about Ranke; one hears a great deal more about Matteo Ricci than about Cardinal Newman, more about Vico than about Ernest Renan. It is probably the case that books on eighteenth-century France have always outstripped books on nineteenth-century France, but in the last twenty years, the balance between them has surely grown more lopsided than ever. And it would not surprise me to learn that in the last ten years, the number of books on eighteenth-century England has outstripped the number devoted to Britain in the next century, especially if one counts books on the British Empire separately. Despite the difficulty of gathering and assessing sources, eighteenth-century Austria, Germany, Italy, and Russia, too, are booming; moreover, these national fields, together with studies of Central Europe, have experienced an even greater propulsion toward the twentieth century than British or French history.⁶ The AHA's statistics show that in 1999-2000, Ph.Ds in European history numbered thirteen in ancient Europe, forty in medieval Europe, fifty-one in early modern Europe, and 162 in modern Europe). This undoubtedly represents a big leap forward for early modernists, a field that hardly existed ten years ago, and, if we assume that the modern Europeanists are divided into nineteenth- and twentieth-century fields more or less as Americans (the AHA has no separate figures for nineteenth-century Europe but does separate nineteenth- and twentieth-century America), this would mean that only about thirty percent of these theses were on nineteenth-century Europe. Presumably, these were theses begun in the early to mid-1990s; I suspect those planning these now are gravitating even more heavily to safer early modern or twentieth-century shores. One should put this positively—the rats are leaping onto the rising ships—but that makes it all the more clear that the boats foundering the fastest are precisely those that once belonged to the nineteenth-century's fleet.

There are, of course, many reasons to love the early modern period. It was, until recently, less crowded than Renaissance studies on the one hand, and 'modern' Europe on the other; and many of its seminal figures—from Spinoza to Maria Theresia, Athanasius Kircher to James II, Olivares to Linnaeus—were unfairly ignored. Moreover, microhistories, like those of Carlo Ginzburg, Edward Muir, and Natalie Davis, showed us how to locate and describe the worlds of the non-seminal folk in intriguing ways; these historians have invented a genre which seems particularly well-suited to the early modern world (and ill-suited, by the way, to post-1800 social his-

⁶The study of modern Greece is one field I can think of that remains heavily oriented to the nineteenth century—but even here, the Anglo-American historians, in particular, seem to be moving back to the pre-revolutionary period, or forward to the twentieth century. See, for example, Molly Greene, *A Shared World* (Princeton, 2000); Mark Mazower, *Inside Hitler's Greece: The Experience of Occupation, 1941-1944* (New Haven, 1993); and Mazower, ed., *After the War was Over* (Princeton, 2000).

⁷For statistics, see http://www.theaha.org/info/99PHDs_jobs.gif (Figure 3).

tory). It seems to me too, that the appeal of the early modern period should be seen as part of our coming to grips with the evils of colonization and the onset of 'disciplinary' institutions; the world before the nineteenth century seems a world with more possibilities, more alternatives for Europe, one not so self-confident, not so predictable, not so voluminous; the eighteenth century, by contrast, now seems a world in which the scale of production is rapidly increasing—as Daniel Roche, for example, showed wonderfully in his book on the French Enlightenment⁸—but not one whose impact and importance depends on numbers (which is arguably the case for the nineteenth century). It is a world less densely littered with documents, one with more diversity in local ecosystems, and fewer players within those smaller worlds. It is a world, as Jürgen Osterhammel has shown in his elegant and erudite survey of early modern travelers to Asia, in which Europeans have not yet become dominant or domineering, and still have a sense of humor.⁹

The nineteenth century, on the other hand, has lost its glow, for better and for worse. The familiar methods applied to its study seem increasingly less generalizable, and its achievements more dubious. Traditionally, and rightly, seen as the era of European hegemony and national integration, the nineteenth century is the hardest of all centuries to decenter, desecularize, and de-nationalize, while the anthropologized early modern and medieval periods offer methods and perspectives which seem useful for investigating other times and places. As Gillis, himself a modern historian, contends: "Our colleagues working in earlier periods have been less burdened by the legacies of nationalism, the gendered separation of spheres, and the various secular culture-building projects that began in the nineteenth century and shaped our agenda until quite recently. I sense that right now early modern history is the more innovative field, perhaps because it has been less constrained by what Habermas has called the 'project of modernity,' more open to the complexity and diversity that has been there all along but which has become more obvious only in the last couple of decades."¹⁰ Where once we implicitly, if not explicitly, chided others for not industrializing and modernizing as Europe had, we have now reduced Europe's Sonderweg to a short, and not very admirable, century, and sent it off into a corner to atone for its earlier hubristic blustering.

Even for those still tilling this field, it seems to have become harder to make the case that the nineteenth century invented anything: from the modern self to the footnote, from the separation of spheres to the origins of popular science, things that once seemed self-evidently nineteenth-century have now been located more firmly in the pre-revolutionary world. The extensive recent discussions about secularization and the continuing importance of religious belief, for example, seem to have concluded in

⁸Daniel Roche, *France in the Enlightenment*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, MA, 1998).

⁹Osterhammel, *Die Entzammerung Asiens: Europa und die asiatischen Reiche im 18. Jahrhundert* (Munich, 1998).

¹⁰Gillis, "Future of European History" (see above).

agreement that secularization happened to institutions in the nineteenth century, but individual piety did not disappear; on the contrary, books like David Blackbourn's *Marpingen* and Ruth Harris's *Louder's* suggest that religious belief continued to play a central role in European culture and politics even in the century's last third.¹¹ "...Religion's overall decline was relative, not absolute," James Sheehan contends, and even those intellectuals who accepted the demise of Christianity recognized that full disenchantment would exact a terrible price.¹²

If secularization did not really occur, neither, perhaps did the bourgeoisie 'rise.' The English and French public spheres, it appears, were formed in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century coffeehouses and salons, about which we have learned a great deal in the last two decades.¹³ From Simon Schama, and others, we have learned to appreciate the ways in which characteristic changes from the aristocratic old regime to the bourgeois modern world such as the replacement of custom by capital and the substitution of commerce and industry for land as the engine of economic growth, occurred not *after*, but *before* 1789.¹⁴ On the other hand, David Cannadine has dated the beginnings of the decline and fall of the British aristocracy to the mid-1880s, and German historians for some time have been pushing the thesis that the nineteenth century saw the 'feudalization' of the bourgeoisie, suggesting that the middle class never really was able to make its own cultural world, much less assert its political clout against the aristocratic elite.¹⁵ Early on in this debate, Arno Mayer formulated the starkest expression of this revisionist sentiment in a book entitled *The Persistence of the Old Regime* (New York, 1981) in which he argued not only for the old order's responsibility for the Great War, but even for its interwar recovery and contribution to fascism. Mayer recognized, of course, that nineteenth-century industrialism and liberalism had changed the game, but still, it was the endpoints which counted: the Old Regime, and the Second World War. Although others have been considerably less radical in their claims, it seems, nonetheless, that bourgeois dominance has been reduced to short periods and confined pockets—Vienna in the *Gründerzeit*, or fin de siècle Hamburg, for example¹⁶—but otherwise eschewed, ignored, or rendered irrelevant.

¹¹David Blackbourn, *Marpingen: Apparitions of the Virgin Mary in Bismarckian Germany* (Oxford, 1995); Ruth Harris, *Louder's: Body and Spirit in the Secular Age* (New York, 2000).

¹²Sheehan, "Culture," in T. C. W. Blanning, ed., *The Short Oxford History of Europe: The Nineteenth Century* (Oxford, 2000), 130-34. For an excellent, detailed study of the problems, see also Owen Chadwick's *The Secularization of the European Mind in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1991).

¹³To cite but two: Roy Porter, *The Creation of the Modern World: The Unfold Story of the British Enlightenment* (New York, 2000); Dena Goodman, *The Republic of Letters: A Cultural History of the French Revolution* (Ithaca, NY, 1994).

¹⁴Simon Schama, *Citizens: A Chronicle of the French Revolution* (New York, 1989), 184-85.

¹⁵David Cannadine, *The Decline and Fall of the British Aristocracy* (New Haven, CT, 1990).

¹⁶Several major recent works, too, focus not on the halcyon years, but on the decline of liberalism; see Richard Evans, *Death in Hamburg: Society and Politics in the Cholera Years, 1830-1910* (Oxford, 1987); John Boyer, *Political Radicalism in Vienna: Christian Socialism in Power, 1897-1918* (Chicago, 1995).

evant.

If the nineteenth century has become the era of the not yet, or the already done, the things that it *did* invent have become more embarrassing than ever. A few examples should suffice: let's take liberalism, class, and bourgeois culture. The first is easy; one hardly needs to mention 'liberalism' to feel a blush coming over; I challenge my readers to devote the next five to ten years to writing about the anti-Corn Law League, or Comtean science. I cannot entirely account for the apparent embarrassment that Joyce simply wrote us out with their linguistic scholasticism.¹⁷ But certainly, we now are so skeptical about the concept of class that we hesitate to use it publicly. As for middle-class culture: Peter Gay, F. M. L. Thompson and Jürgen Köcke surely do still believe in the importance of nineteenth-century respectability, but they have been swamped by the huge number of studies of French and English eighteenth-century 'civility,' a more refined and less Freudian preparation for modern middle-class culture.¹⁸ Civility is certainly less embarrassing than respectability—who doesn't prefer the Earl of Shaftesbury to Mr. Pooler? Even with a Darwinian dose of gutter enlighteners, the cultural world of the eighteenth century is infinitely more to our current taste than the nineteenth-century penny press and the long-winded effusions of Guizot and Gladstone. In any event, topics like liberalism, class, and middle-class culture seem ringed about with a toxic cloud of aesthetic revision and professional disapproval; it isn't safe to go back in there yet.

If these major subjects are off-limits, many of the nineteenth century's more specific signature features are fully out of fashion; let me list a few simply to suggest the immense number of topics now being sidelined: capital accumulation, work, machinery, bureaucracy, strikes and peasant revolts, inventions, patents, peasants, steel production, ship building, public education, agricultural production, positivist science, tariffs, voting patterns, and demographic phenomena such as infant mortality. We are skirting some parts of high intellectual history, such as political philosophy, theater, poetry, and all parts of diplomatic history, from Castlereagh to von Bulow. What was once a lively discussion of the history of professionalization has now been sidelined in favor of studies of earlier antiquarians and gentlemen scientists. This is not, of course, to denounce the new work or to deny that there are many wonderful scholars still writing nineteenth-century histories from Isser Woloch to Bonnie Smith, James Sheehan to Kathleen Canning, Jonathan Beecher to Jonathan Spertus, David Blackburn to Margaret Anderson. But they are lonelier than they used to be,

¹⁷See, Gareth Stedman Jones, *Languages of Class: Studies in English Working Class History, 1832-1840-1914* (New York, 1991) and *Class (Oxford, 1995)*.

¹⁸See F. M. L. Thompson, *The Rise of Respectable Society: A Social History of Victorian Britain, 1830-1900* (Cambridge, Mass., 1988); Werner Conze and Jürgen Köcke, eds., *Bildungsbürgertum im 19. Jahrhundert*, 4 vols. (Stuttgart, 1985-1992); Peter Gay, *Schmidler's Century: The Making of Middle-Class Culture, 1815-1914* (New York, 2001).

and one fears that their students and junior colleagues will succumb to the siren songs of the seventeenth and twentieth centuries, leaving fallow Metternich's now dusty plain.

Of course, there are subjects still being hotly pursued, a list of which would certainly include: national consciousness, religious identities, photography and the origins of film, travel and leisure, racial and ethnic stereotyping and 'images'; bourgeois associational life, and the two biggies, imperialism and Nietzsche. But even these subjects are now cast in a new, unflattering light. They emphasize stasis rather than progress, repression rather than liberation, failures of nerve rather than the fulfillment of dreams.¹⁹ Our nineteenth century is not one in which representative government was firmly established (at least for white males, which should indeed count for something, though not everything) and meritocracy accepted (if, again, not universally applied); we rarely pause to recognize the salutary impact of rising real wages (by the century's end) and decreasing infant mortality.²⁰ Instead, we emphasize those whose boats did not rise (women) or whose stock actually fell (artisans; the colonized), or retreat into the study of pet-keeping and three-piece suits. To paraphrase an old saying, every generation gets the nineteenth century they deserve—if this is true, then we have certainly become a morose bunch, with racial prejudice our only real political issue and our cultural visions suspended, largely, between the trivial and the terrifying.

Now, we are not the only generation to be repelled by the nineteenth century, and a little perspective might help us figure out what, exactly, has made for our embarrassment. Clearly, our reaction is not that of Max Nordau, the German-Jewish critic who attacked post-Ibsenian Europe for its value relativism and flaccid self-centeredness in his 1892 volume entitled *Degeneration*. Nor, luckily, is it that of Houston Stewart Chamberlain, whose enormously successful *Foundations of the Nineteenth Century* (1899) attributed the century's ills to racial mongrelization. Sobered by the cataclysms of the twentieth century, we no longer see its predecessor in the apocalyptic terms of Fourier and the young Marx (though seeing it as the 'farce' that followed the eighteenth-century's 'tragedy'—as he did in the 18th Brumaire, captures something of our sense of the banality and buffoonery of the era). More to the point, however, is the analysis of the reactionary essayist Leon Daudet, who in 1922 published a book entitled *The Stupid Nineteenth Century*. Here, Daudet, in the course of denouncing nineteenth-century rationalism, romanticism, humanitarianism, and especially liberalism, identified pride as the nineteenth-century's "distinguishing mark" and fatal flaw. "... Motionless, content, and beatific," he wrote of the period, "it

¹⁹Jonathan Crary's *Suspensions of Perception* (Cambridge, Mass., 2000), for example, traces the origins of modern couch potato-dom and attention deficit disorder to the increasing mechanization of techniques of observation over the course of the nineteenth century.

²⁰Exceptions here include Margarete Anderson's *Practicing Democracy* (Princeton, 2000); Eugen Weber's *France, Fin de Siècle* (Cambridge, MA, 1986).

makes us reluctant to mark a turning point without direct evidence. In response to deconstructionist challenges, nowadays we feel we need to know how facts and changes were *actually* produced and experienced in order to understand *wie es eigentlich gewesen*—and that 'actually' requires an explicit statement. If this is, generally speaking, a positive development, which forces us to give our statistics experiential legs, it also has its consequences and complications, a few of which I will describe below.

What has made for this change in methods? Some have chalked it up merely to laziness, to political correctness, or to corrosive, deconstructionist skepticism. This is certainly unfair; I dare say historians work as hard today, and with equal impulses to conform or rebel, as they did twenty or fifty or one hundred years ago. 'Idealism,' and the focus on local rather than grand narratives, is partly a response to the perceived weaknesses of the previous generations' 'meat and potatoes' history, and partly an attempt to demonstrate novelty (sometimes gratuitously) in a professional world increasingly impressed by new conceptualizations rather than by filling gaps with detailed information. Moreover, there are social and material aspects to this change: if we already did not doubt its truthfulness, we still could not socially, professionally, or physically uphold the old doctrine of exhaustive coverage. For openers, specialization and the enormous production of monographs in the last twenty years has made the old-fashioned, 'comprehensive' investigation of big subjects like English liberalism impossible for individuals. This is in part a result of the vast new archival and printed sources now available to us, by computer, interlibrary loan, or swift airline travel, but also the product of social changes in the profession in the last twenty or so years. We take teaching (and especially interactive instruction) more seriously on the whole than we used to, and we perform more administrative duties than ever before; all this cuts into research time. We have computers, but fewer personal secretaries or archival gophers. The influx of women and of men with working wives means that one confronts more difficulty in leaving home for long periods of time to do the old fashioned archival research necessary for many topics in social and economic history. All of these changes have made studies of images and languages (based chiefly on printed primary material) more attractive. One need not see this as a 'decline.' I like to think of James Henry Breasted, the Egyptologist, who declined the opportunity to excavate with Flinders Petrie in the 1890s in favor of preserving and interpreting some of the massive material already above ground. Today we need Petrie-like excavators for sure—but we also have plenty of 'monuments' awaiting the unique attention and interpretive talents a cadre of Bressieds alone can bestow.

Moreover, engaging in new sorts of studies gives us people to talk to. In the last two decades, social scientists have been increasingly pulled into the more powerful and lucrative orbits of policy studies and the natural sciences, robbing us of our older interlocutors. Perhaps in compensation, literary scholars, anthropologists, scholars of music and art have moved closer to our concerns, and we to theirs. In this new dis-

sat like an ass in a pool, admiring its reflection, calling upon the passers-by to acclaim and admire it."²¹

Certainly, by now, that ass has grown up a little, yet, what the nineteenth century used to be—that is, self-satisfied and certain that its own development should be everybody else's model—remains its chief problem today. This is clear in European studies of the Foucauldian persuasion—but even more so in recent 'post colonial' critiques. Here, although the Enlightenment has received many a tongue-lashing, when one reads carefully, it is clear that it is really Enlightened universalism *plus* the hypocrisies introduced by nineteenth-century historicism which rankles. As Dipesh Chakrabarty contends in his recent contribution to postcolonial theory, *Provincializing Europe*: "I do not mean to suggest that reason as such is elitist. Reason becomes elitist whenever we allow unreason and superstition to stand in for backwardness, that is to say, when reason colludes with the logic of historicist thought. For then we see our 'superstitious' contemporaries as examples of an 'earlier type,' as human embodiments of the principle of anachronism."²² That is to say, it is the nineteenth, not the eighteenth, century, which produced the ugliest ideas and which has prevented us from understanding local ecosystems in their own terms.

Another reason for the nineteenth century's new unsightliness must be that the methods we once used for assessing its importance are no longer credible. We have experienced in recent years what I will call an 'idealist' shift away from statistics and material realities toward images and identities, one that makes clear articulation in language (rather than presumptive proof through numbers) imperative. Regrettably, since social forces (wage labor, literacy, steam power) do not have voices of their own, we are hard pressed to pinpoint their precise role and impact in history and often retreat into scrutinizing images, or endlessly confronted with the question, yes, but what did the building of 15,809 kilometers of railroad in Italy between 1850 and 1900²³ mean to Italians? Consciousness even in debates on class now is the uppermost concern, and consciousness can no longer be inferred (as did E. P. Thompson's *Making of the English Working Class* in 1966), but must be clearly articulated. This idealist shift is part of what allows developments to be pushed back into the eighteenth century or beyond, where the first conception of something can be found, or forward into the twentieth century, when everybody finally gets the message (as in Eugen Weber's famous argument in *Peasants into Frenchmen* [Stanford, 1976], that France did not, in some sense, fully exist for all its inhabitants until the eve of the Great War). This is not idealism in the sense of optimism; quite the contrary; we seem not to believe that things have, or can, change very much, a presumption which

²¹ Leon Daudet, *The Stupid XIXth Century*, trans. Lewis Galantiere (New York, 1928), 15.

²² Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, 2000), 238.

²³ Statistics from B. R. Mitchell's *European Historical Statistics, 1750-1970* (New York, 1975), 315, 317.

disciplinary configuration, historians are trained to interpret documents as literary artifacts, not to sort and count, and perhaps more importantly, to suggest and to reinterpret, rather than to offer definitive proof or scorch someone's evidentiary undershorts.

But this does not mean that we should throw ourselves, collectively, entirely into the pursuit of 'idealist' histories; by doing so, topics of what I will unabashedly describe as major importance will be avoided and real factors which exist, but leave little impact on the imagination or have become old-hat (like wage labor, bureaucratization, and vaccines) wrongly downplayed. I would not go so far as A. G. Hopkins, who deplored the effects of the new tendencies on the study of imperial history in a review essay of 1999: "By studying images and symbols, scholars can avoid grappling with reality while being *au courant* in doubting its existence. The new skepticism has enabled researchers to retreat from the hard political and economic questions that were once central to imperial history. Modes of production have been replaced by modes of discourse; ideas have become material forces; material forces, as once understood, have become epiphenomena."²⁴ Hopkins's reading is, in my view, unduly harsh, but it does suggest the degree to which times have changed since the publication of his first book in 1973. And he is right—we can go too far around the literary bend and end up knowing nothing about the world 'out there'—which surely does exist, if only to periodically revenge itself on those who deny its power. Moreover, we must be especially wary of taking too literary a turn in studying certain subjects, especially those in which the fates of many are bound together, and power distributed in vastly unequal ways. Obscuring 'who is speaking,' or emphasizing creative reception often obscures who is profiting, and who is setting the rules for discursive interaction.

In practice, too, the 'idealist' approach also has major drawbacks, not the least of which is the difficulty of generalizing experience—something particularly tricky for an age with many potential agents, but relatively few direct testimonials from those on the receiving, rather than the producing end. This is to say, we have plenty of records that describe the financing and building of Italian railroads, but (probably, this is a conjectural instance) few responses explaining what the coming of mass transit means. Let's say there are six Piedmontese accounts, three of them literary, two from Milan, all from male writers (and locating such evidence is by no means easy)—is this enough? How many spokespersons does one need to characterize accurately the Italian experience of railroad construction? Does it matter, to use Foucauldian language, who is speaking (e.g., no women, no Sicilians, three literary characters, only one from a small town)? What if the texts disagree? Moreover, we don't yet have a gravitas test for this sort of history; what is a serious study of the Italian image of

²⁴ A. G. Hopkins, "Back to the Future: From National History to Imperial History" in *Past and Present*, CLXIV (August 1999), 199.

railroads, and what is a superficial account? We seem to want to retain national consciousness for nineteenth-century studies, something the early modernists usually eschew; this makes typical microhistory subjects, or specific entities (courts, circles of correspondents, clerical bodies) harder to see as significant in themselves, especially as our canons of 'importance' change, and it becomes more and more clear that 'meaning' is generalizable at all, surely isn't national. Perhaps nineteenth-century historians, blessed with extensive archives and the ability to document the avenues by which images acquire political, social, and cultural salience, can really make a contribution here and figure out how to investigate meaning on the more than micro level—but we really haven't tackled this problem at the theoretical level yet.

So, you may be wondering, what should we do about all of this? How can we get over our embarrassment? Or should we try? Sometimes embarrassment is healthy; it is surely a good thing that we no longer believe in definitive studies, in the ability of numbers to describe perceived conditions, or in the exemplariness of European history. All signs point to the further decentering of Europe—rather than resisting this, we need to learn to live with it and indeed to profit from it. This does not mean Europe-bashing; it means, rather, in Chakrabarty's nice phrase, provincializing Europe, understanding its peculiarities *vis à vis* the rest of the world without presuming its exemplariness, and, at least occasionally, getting outside this world to see it with non-European spectacles. Jeffrey Wasserstrom recently suggested a policy of 'Read globally, write locally'²⁵—and it certainly is the case that Europeanists could learn a thing or two from non-European specialists, including from American historians. Accepting an equalization of the cultural gradient is, I think, imperative if we want to breathe new life into old subjects, and restore ourselves to semi-respectability.

This does not mean we have to give up on the field—quite the contrary! We can, I am confident, make the case for the uniqueness and central import of the nineteenth century without resorting to old historiographic prejudices. To do so, we need to keep in mind what we've learned from early modern revisionism, and from the new twentieth-century studies—but there, too, we should profit from, not resent, critiques of the old school. We could learn a lesson or two from the fate of classics, a master discipline in the nineteenth century which was forced to deal with its own provincialization in the twentieth, as school reform, nationalism, and the growth of the natural sciences pressed scholars and students in more modern and diverse directions. After a period of crabby resistance and pretended obliviousness, classics, at least in America, England, and France, has accepted its provincial status and updated its perspectives—without the destruction of its rigorous professional standards. Classics won't ever have the social clout it had in the nineteenth century—and maybe nineteenth-century Europe won't ever return to the position it had in the 1950s-70s. But if we

²⁵ Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom, "Eurocentrism and Its Discontents" (2001); <http://www.theohsa.org/perspectives/issues/2001.0101>

stick our heads in the collective sand, we will certainly lose a generation, or two, of students entirely to other pursuits—and endure the slings and arrows of an outraged fortune that we might successfully temper with a timely attempt at renewal.

My sense is that we need to make our embarrassments work for us, to identify the unsightly subjects, and to attack them with new methods and a new will to dissection, not to simple denunciation. Economic history is one major field waiting for renovation; one doesn't have to be a Marxist to appreciate the ways in which the nineteenth-century European market shaped (of course not exclusively!) cultural as well as political history, at home and abroad, and one doesn't have to be a Marxist, or an economic historian, to incorporate market data into wider surveys of European culture and society. Did you know that there were cartels in perambulators and skates as well as in steel production in later nineteenth-century Germany? I learned this from David Blackburn's recent *The Long Nineteenth Century, A History of Germany, 1780-1918* (London, 1997), a book I highly recommend as a model for the integration of economic and other forms of history.²⁶ Trans-oceanic trade has recently become a hot topic for early modernists: why not revisit, with suitably restrained eyes, the story of nineteenth-century trade, too?

It is not, in my view, necessary to slay the hydra of firsts, but we should not accept the revisionists' arguments without a real debate. We might, for example, learn to look for the nineteenth-century's innovations in combined terms—that is, not to see the advent of capitalism as the one and only pivotal point in European economic history, but to investigate the social and cultural effects of the emergence of managerial capitalism; for example, something Alfred Chandler accomplished for American history so wonderfully in his 1977 classic, *The Visible Hand*.²⁷ Business history, in particular, if integrated into general history, might help us understand the nineteenth-century's unique contribution to 'modernity': we might still not like it, but we would undoubtedly see something of ourselves, individually and institutionally, in a portrait which featured stock-market plunges and layoffs, advertising ploys and underselling, sexual harassment and exploitation of colonial labor, book-keepers and consumer-pleasers. Here again we would be making our embarrassments work for us; by exposing the power of that ever embarrassing substance, money, and detailing the cultures dependent on it, we might speak more forcefully to contemporary concerns, and even offer some useful historical and critical perspective for current debates.

Naturally, there are other ways to appreciate the century's developments. If the nineteenth century didn't invent the public sphere, it has strong claims to have invented the *uncensored* public sphere, which is at least as important a turning point. So much remains to be done on the history of the book trade in the nineteenth

²⁶See, here, 322.

²⁷Subtitled *The Managerial Revolution in American Business* (Cambridge, MA, 1977).

century we can hardly guess the results we might obtain.²⁸ If travel literature, for example, long predates 1800, the mass market for this material does not, nor does, if we believe Eugen Weber, the widespread consumption of meat, taking of baths, and use of money.²⁹ Even changes in intensity, quantity, scale, and scope that do not involve inventing something new are clearly historically significant. C. A. Bayly's *Empire and Information*³⁰ is a wonderful example of a study which shows, subtly, how the intensity and extensiveness of state scrutiny changed the imperial enterprise between the 1780s and the 1830s; we could all benefit from more studies like his.

To decenter nineteenth-century intellectual history is perhaps already a Sisyphean task; though one may shove the dead white men (Hegel, Marx, Tocqueville, Arnold, Flaubert, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Burckhardt, Darwin, etc) out of the way, they have a tendency to roll back on top of one. But we can see their landscapes as well as their texts in new ways, sometimes by rearranging the boulders, or by changing the angle of perspective; by adding new figures or new focal points. Biography remains a royal road to understanding here, pace the deconstructionist critics, but we can also experiment further with collective biographies (generational, urban, professional, situational).³¹ In any event, we must, in my view, allow free passage between the worlds of high and low culture, between those of 'great' writers and those of 'normal' scientists, and between Europe and 'the rest'; cultural historians and historians of science have begun to show how European ideas were shaped by encounters abroad, and intellectual historians need, too, to reexamine familiar figures and problems in this light. Adopting methods from cultural history, we can use mediocre minds, as well as innovators, to understand larger problems and trends in the nineteenth-century societies we choose to investigate. But we must be sure to make the case for the importance of our studies, not just assert an importance that may not, for many of our readers, be self-evident.

The field of nineteenth-century cultural history seems to me particularly rich—it is already being widely exploited, if not in ways that the profession as a whole has noticed. True, some of its exemplary figures—Balzac's Rastignac and Flaubert's Emma Bovary, Madame Blavatsky and Herbert Spencer—are not tremendously elegant or witty, but is nineteenth-century culture so bad? True, the superior poverty of the seventeenth century made such mass-producing and -pleasing painters such as Bougereau, B'cklin, and Alma Tadema impossible, though I submit that Austrian medieval altarpieces and eighteenth-century Swedish painting—in which gargan-

²⁸We do have, however, Reinhard Wittmann's *Geschichte des deutschen Buchhandels* (Munich, 1999).

²⁹Indeed, for Weber, this hardly predates WWI. See Weber, *Peasants, Fin de Siècle*, 59-68.

³⁰C. A. Bayly, *Empire and Information: Information Gathering and Social Communication in India, 1780-1870* (New York, 1996).

³¹There are some particularly good examples here, from the previous generation, e.g., Carl Schorske's *Fin de Siècle Vienna* (New York, 1979); Alan Spitzer's *The French Generation of 1820* (Princeton, 1987); and Michael Curtis, *Three Against the Third Republic: Sorel, Barrès, and Maurras* (Princeton, 1959).

tuans hunting dogs and improbably feathered guinea hens figure prominently—are as embarrassing as anything hanging in the Gate D’Orsay. And precisely where the products are embarrassingly ill-conceived or shoddily constructed, we can find clues to understanding that amorphous world known as mass or popular culture, another subject nineteenth-century historians are uniquely equipped to understand.

So, we can overcome or at least use constructively some of our embarrassment and give the century its due without returning to that reflecting pool. But historians cannot and should not obscure the fact that history as it is lived is often an unsightly set of already and not-yets, of the progressive and disastrous coexisting, of some people trying to foist their ‘civilizations’ on others they deem uncivilized and exploitable. We cannot forget that nineteenth-century Europeans committed some unsightly acts, ideological and economic, military and cultural—but in fairness, so did the Chinese, in repressing the Taiping Rebellion and the Ottomans in dealing with the Armenians—and we should also be politically brave, if not politically correct, in continuing to document the nineteenth century’s lasting benefits, like the expansion of the franchise and the liberations of the slaves and serfs. Rather than striving for exemplariness, we should strive for perfected provincialism—and hope we can make our embarrassment work for nineteenth-century history rather than *against* it. I do think this can happen, and I know many who are eager to take up their pens. I hope to be able to report, in another twenty years’ time, that this generation of nineteenth-century historians looked our embarrassments in the eye—and did not blink.

Popular Culture as History at the End of the Eighteenth Century

Eighteenth-Century Transylvanian Calendars Curiosity or Valuable Source of History?

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Calendars are a very old type of popular literature. Geneviève Bollème, who has published an important study of them, believes that the genre reaches back to manuscript form in the Greco-Roman era, while R. A. Houston, a leading student of literacy, concludes that they emerged in fifteenth-century Italy.¹ This discrepancy may stem from the fact that these small books are really almanacs rather than simple calendars, which probably existed in ancient times, whereas almanacs are more recent innovation. It is more certain that the first printed calendar, published in German, dates from 1455.² Calendars were profitable, and that is what prompted publishers to issue them year after year. They became so profitable and popular that by the last decades of the eighteenth century, the best-selling French calendars sold 150,000 copies or more annually.³ Poor and rich urbanites and especially peasants bought most of them.⁴ Although everyone from eighteenth-century observers to twentieth-century scholars agree on the popularity of calendars, none has concluded that they contain any writing of literary value; consequently, most work on calendars since the end of the nineteenth century has confined itself to

¹Geneviève Bollème, *Les Almanachs populaires aux XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles: essai d'histoire sociale*, (Paris 1969), 11; R. A. Houston, *Literacy in Modern Europe: Culture and Education, 1500-1800* (London, 1988), 88.

²Bollème, *Les Almanachs*, 11.

³*Ibid.*, 14; Andries, “Almanacs,” 205.

⁴Rudolf Schenda, *Völké Ohne Buch: Studien zur Sozialgeschichte der populären Lesestoffe, 1770-15* (Frankfurt a.M., 1970), 281.

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